

Shoe Factory is Heart and Sole of Pocahontas County

MARLINTON, W.Va. (AP) — Inside the West Virginia Shoe Co., the smell of fresh leather replaces the stench of a flood that swept through town only a few weeks ago.

Factory hands toil to satisfy a contract obligating the firm to supply 15,000 pairs of shoes to the JC Penney Co.

"That's a significant contract," said Gordon Stuart, a Beckley native who serves as president of the fledgling firm that replaced the old Hanover Shoe Co.

"We're very fortunate to get it. That's going to be the backbone of this business."

Hanover once had a payroll of 225 before pulling up stakes last year.

"When this factory closed down, several of us realized we had a lot of good people in the community who needed work and were trained shoemakers," Stuart said.

"It was a challenge for us to come down here and see if we could get something started. We're beginning to grow."

With the JC Penney contract, the firm will turn out shoes in the medium price range, retailing for \$85 to \$150.

Ultimately, Stuart wants to see the new firm with more employees than the old Hanover plant.

"It's not going to be tomorrow," cautioned Stuart, who has been in the shoe business since leaving the U.S. Marine Corps. "I'd like to get this plant to producing around 2,400 pairs a day."

Tim Huffman, one of the four owners, said the firm also landed a contract to supply 375 pairs of elevator shoes a day to Rich Lee of Maryland.

Recently, Huffman went to a town hall meeting to get an idea of the labor market and saw the two sides of the economic picture in Pocahontas County. Some 150 people attended.

"That shows that, yes, there is a tremendous labor market," he said. "But it also shows there's a tremendous unemployment problem."

Hanover Shoe stayed in business for three decades in this town,

but closed its doors in January 1995.

West Virginia Shoe acquired the building last summer and began producing some samples, but only recently swung into production.

"We're just getting started, basically," Huffman said. "We're brand new."

Right off, the firm put 35 people on the payroll. Huffman hopes to add a like number soon.

Huffman shares the concerns of those who live along the flood plain. After all, many were told a decade ago they would never see a flood of such magnitude again.

"I'm sure for people who live on low ground, if there's nothing going to happen as far as flood control, then I would say people should be concerned," he said. "The mood is fine. They're working to get everything back in shape. It doesn't take this community long to bounce back."

Lucky for the shoe factory, only half an inch of water crept indoors, causing no real damage. The employees were back on the job in

two days after they joined volunteers in restoring the plant.

"We've got some experienced shoemakers in this community," he said, noting the presence of Hanover since the 1960s.

Among them is Jack Hess, who left after 39 years in the trade to apply his talents as a shoe consultant. Now, he's back at work for West Virginia Shoe and he's convinced the new firm will make it.

"Absolutely," he said, smiling. "That's why I'm here, to help them make it."

Stuart said the flood did nothing to lower morale.

"It didn't leave us discouraged," he said. "All it left was a plant full of mud and muck. It's amazing to see how these folks here in the community came in and gave us a hand to get us cleaned up."

Fortunately, he noted, the plant lost neither raw materials nor equipment.

"There's a lot of heavy lifting to be done here yet, but we're encouraged," Stuart said.